

**SOME REMARKS ON THE SLAVE TRADE IN THE HEART  
OF THE GOLDEN HORDE (14<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)  
IN THE WAKE OF C. VERLINDEN'S RESEARCH**

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*Objective:* For decades the slave trade was very lucrative for the Italian merchants who travelled to the East. The formation of the Mongol Empire, and the economic and demographic growth occurred in Europe, have contributed to the increase of both, the demand of slaves and the supply human merchandise. Trade increased with the simultaneous increase in the number of journeys of western merchants to the East.

The creation of a structured trading system on the Black Sea coast has allowed Genoa and Venice to strengthen their trade relations with the dominant centers of power *in loco*: the Golden Horde of the Mongols and the Mamluks of Egypt.

*Materials:* This article is a preliminary critical mapping of a larger project I'm working on, and which aims to explore the relationship between Italian commercial immigration and the slave trade in the Venetian settlement of Tana, situated in the mouth of the Don, and representing the easternmost outpost of all Latin Trading System in the East in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Based on a solid historiographical tradition and the Venetian documentary sources, I'm trying to restore the perception of a slave in the unique context of the Golden Horde, where the western urban mercantile and the eastern nomadic factors came into contact.

*Results and novelty of the research:* While many of the conclusions of this research are still to be confirmed, a primary investigation has shown that slaves were not only the primary and most profitable resource for Italian merchants, but also the most direct and effective means to penetrate and understand an ethnic and culturally stranger context.

***Keywords:*** Black Sea, Slavery, Venice, Genoa, Medieval Mediterranean

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The commerce of slaves was, for decades, a very profitable activity for the merchants who traveled within the borders of the Golden Horde. This rewarding business grew particularly during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the accessibility of slaves increased. A major cause of this was a permanent state of war largely due to the Mongol invasions. In the same decades, Western Europe was going through an extraordinary economic and demographic growth. The creation of the Mongol Empire – a coherent political power extended over an immense territory – was a relatively new condition that favored the movement of people and commodities between Europe and Asia. The new political situation stimulated international trade; merchants from Central Asia (Turkestan and Il-khanate) and Western Europe became the protagonists of a wide range trade of slaves. The Italian sea republics, Genoa and Venice in particular, built a complex system of *emporium* on the shores

of the Black Sea, taking advantage of the new political situation, and negotiating the terms for establishing their commercial settlements directly with the Mongol governor of the region.

The increased availability of human merchandise, and a more established Western presence in the East, gave a decisive boost to the commerce of slaves; therefore, the basin of the Black Sea became the most lucrative area of the whole economic system of the Middle Ages for recruiting slaves (see C. Verlinden [26; 28] and Y. Rotman [23]).

By virtue of its strategic position, between the mouth of the Don River and the Azov Sea, the settlement of Tana represents a particularly interesting case for investigating human movements in this region; it was the easternmost settlement of the whole Venetian commercial network. Tana never rose to become a major center; however, its strong commercial vocation made the settlement a lively meeting point for diverse peoples, coming from different cultural contexts, creating numerous occasions for this ethnic complexity to come into contact.

The slave trade is a very well studied topic for the Middle Ages and for this region in particular. Yet, collected data have to be taken with caution, especially because the only perspective we have is partial. For what concerns the 14<sup>th</sup> century, I have studied the documents drafted in Tana by the Venetian notaries Benedetto Bianco [1, busta 19; 6, busta 106], Marco Marcello [1, busta 117] and E. Fenster [11, p. 161–195]), and some parchments preserved in the State Archive of Venice, fondo Procuratori di San Marco [4, buste 149 and 250; 6, buste 85, 104, 127, 135]. For the 15<sup>th</sup> century, I have analyzed the production of the notaries Donato de Mano [19] and PSM Citra [4, busta 92] on the activity of Andrea Giustiniani, Moretto Bon [10] and Cristoforo Rizzo [25; 26] plus, other charts of the same fondo, Procuratori di San Marco [4, busta 149] and PSM Misti [6, buste 146a, 215]. The documentation available consists almost entirely of Genoese and Venetian primary sources, which present two important advantages: they were produced *in loco* and are available in a satisfactory amount. Nevertheless, the notaries who produced these documents were Italian; their primary purpose was to serve the client and the client was often a fellow citizen or native to the Italian Peninsula. This is, together with the “partiality” of the sources mentioned above, the main limit of such a research. Tartars, Armenians, Muslims and Greeks all consulted Italian notaries, and are therefore occasionally mentioned in the available primary sources. However, these groups were probably a more significant presence than what we can conclude with certainty based on these sources. Likewise, we should take into account the “Adriatic displacement” of the documents; those from other parts of the Italian Peninsula are partially represented in the sources. Yet, I still believe that the results can be useful to understand the economic and social dynamic of interaction between the local population (Tatars and Turkish nomads) and the foreign merchants (Western Europeans, but also Muslim from Central Asia) who lived there; locals and Westerners had two very distant aggregative models and two diverse concepts of slavery (see on this: [20, p. 102–110]). The Italian merchants travelled on the Azov Sea with their urban mercantile cultural background, according to which the servant represents a good, which can be the object of commercial transaction.

The Venetian notaries who worked in Tana since the 1350's, produced a large mass of contracts in a time when the settlement was slowly recovering after the

harsh crisis of the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. Their documents contain the names of more than 700 individuals, a figure that allows us to try some hypothesis.

In mid-14<sup>th</sup> century Tana, the buying and selling of slaves was the main business: more than 50% of all total transactions.

Tana was the place where supply and demand met, one of the more abundant zones for buying slaves and an extremely strategic outpost in heart of the Golden Horde, which was the institutional framework of a nomadic society that had become commerce oriented.

The notarial documents show how the locals, Mongols, and Turks, did not directly participate in the business transactions; they merely adjusted and governed them. The *noyon* that governed a certain *tümen*, had the responsibility of every movement occurred *in loco*. Obviously, the majority of the people – still strongly identifiable with nomadism – remained strangers to this practice and only the local aristocracy was in charge of it. In Tana, the natives and the Western immigration did never really integrate and the separation between the two communities remained neat. Some data from the sources will help a better understanding of it.

On 400 documents, 234 (58,5%) are contracts for buying and selling slaves. Tana was a commercial outpost for Venetians and Genoese, it was a transit market for the slave trade. On the contrary, Caffa became in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, an arrival point for slaves. The Crimean city had grown significantly and its population became more stable [8, p. 301]. According to his calculations, Caffa reached a population of circa 20,000 in the years 1385–86. This new situation augmented the necessity of manpower; the use of slave labor became increasingly frequent. In fact, the Genoese authorities created a new body to superintend the import of slaves in town, the *officiales capitum s. Anthonii*. According to the data of the *Massaria* of Caffa, the *Officium capitum s. Anthonii* perceived an income of one third of the total of tolls (gabelle) in town [8, p. 299–300]. The presence of instrument to control the slave trafficking and the taxation imposed on this commerce pushed the merchants to go around Caffa, when possible, and do business somewhere else. Tana was a privileged place for this, not only because it was in the heart of the Golden Horde, therefore in the proximity of the wealthier “reservoir” of people, but also because slave sales were not subject to taxation [29, p. 185–202; 8, p. 301].

On 8 June 1360, Bartolomeo di Promontorio, a Genoese who lives in Pera, sold one of his slaves (*que emit in Caffa*) in Tana to the Florentine Bartolomeo di Nuto. The girl is 16 and Tatar (*genere tartarorum*). The average price for girls of that age was circa 6–700 aspers. In this case, the price is fixed to 8 silver *sommi*, which corresponded to 1520 aspers, more than double [1, busta 19, registro I/26].

Among the documents I analyzed, 26 reports of Genoese merchants selling slaves, none of who was a buyer [1, busta 19; 27; 8, p. 300]. The majority of them consisted of temporary inhabitants (*habitatores Tane*), or merchants coming from Pera, Caffa, and Candia.

Some of the slaves purchased in Tana were imported to Venice or somewhere else in Italy. Unfortunately, there does not exist a recent systematic study on Venice and slavery, based on the documentation of 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries, apart from the old Lazzari [17]. In C. Verlinden [28, Vol. II, p. 550–710] there is a section dedicated to this topic, and it is still an important point of reference for researches. On Genoa, besides the already mentioned Gioffrè [12], see M. Balard [8, p. 785–833].

In the period when the trade seems to be more profitable, we find in Venice many people owning Tatar slaves. On 16 June 1368, Niccolò da Pesaro bought from Niccolò Rubino an 11 years old Tatar boy for 26 golden ducats; in December, the same Niccolò purchased a Tatar girl from Pietro Stornello for 22 ducats [6, busta 150]. In 1365, Pietro Morosini drafts his testament and appears as the owner of several slaves, Greek and Tatar. He freed them all. The testament was written in Venice on 24 July 1365 [6, busta 128].

Documents about possession of slaves are numerous also in the 1370's [6, buste 144, 123, 147 and 166]. In 1372 Florence, out of 357, 274 are Tatars (77%). Among others, there are 30 Greeks, 13 Russians, 8 Turkish, and 4 Circassians [18, p. 336; 12, p. 14]. Therefore, it is not random that a Florentine merchant, Domenico dei Benci, is the most active seller of slaves in Tana between 1359 and 1360. It is the same in Genoa, where the majority of slaves imported in the 14<sup>th</sup> century are Tatars [8, p. 794, 799]. Balard calculated that the 64% of slaves in Genoa was *genere tartarorum*; the second most represented ethnic group is the Circassian (only 7,1%).

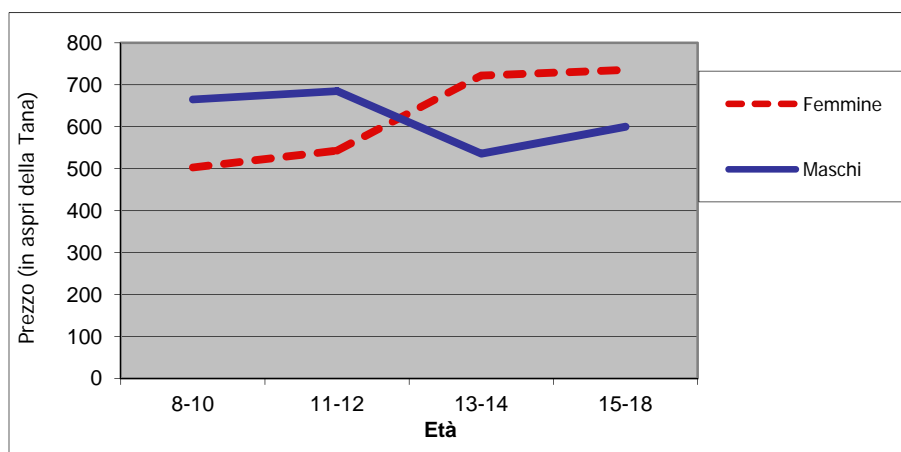
In these years, among the slaves traded in Tana, the ethnic majority are Tatars, but it is necessary to make a distinction between what this ethnonym meant in the Trecento to a Western European merchant or notary, and what a Tatar actually was. In his research, Gioffrè noted how in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Russian slaves increased significantly, while the Tatars decreased. The scholar explained it with the crisis of the Grand Duchy of Moscow and its troubled relations with the Baltic powers. It is undeniable that Moscow was going through a very difficult period from a political point of view, but it is equally true that in these years the city was slowly emerging as a hegemonic center over the Russian lands. Furthermore, for the Westerners, the ethnonym *Russo/russorum* did not necessarily mean the Muscovites or those who lived around the cities; they were more likely all those who came from the Northern forest zone, which is to say distinct from the Tatars. Nevertheless, those that the Western merchants called Tatar, very rarely were Mongols. In fact, the documents I have analyzed indicate very often the Tatars (*genere tartarorum*), and very rarely the Mongols (*genere mongalorum*). Furthermore, I have rarely found in the sources the ethnonym *cumanus*, which was likely the dominant ethnic element around the Latin *emporia* on the Northern shores of the Black Sea. The sources show that the notaries and the merchants their clients very generally and superficially knew the difference between the several ethnic groups that lived in the Black Sea region. It was a problem of perception of the other. The languages were incomprehensible, the color of the skin was different, and so was the lifestyle. These factors affected the different attitude of the individuals who lived in Tana; it is hard to believe that our notaries knew the anthropological difference between a Tatar and a Mongol.

In any case, it seems that the Mongol and the Tatar slaves (*genere mongalorum* and *genere tartarorum*) were all those purchased from the nomadic tribes of the steppe. The Golden Horde was not a state rich of cities. The khans constantly needed to increase their incomes. Trade, and slavery in particular, represented the most profitable resource through taxation. Furthermore, after the death of Janibek the leadership of the state became very unstable. In times of political troubles, the need of money of the Treasure augmented, so taxation increased. Villagers were forced to sell their children in order to support the fiscal pressure.

Out of 238 slaves found in the records, 178 are described as *genere tartarorum* (74,78%). The rest is shared equally among Alans (9), Circassians (25), Mongols (17) and only one 18 years old Greek girl, that *ser* Marcello Pilotto sells to Andrea de Bernardo on 19 September 1359 [1, busta 19, I/38]).

In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, the situation changes and the recruitment of *tatar* slaves decreased significantly both in Genoa and in Venice, especially because of the Timurid military advance [12, p. 15, 58; 29, p. 126]. If in the first two decades 1400–1424 in Genoa there are 105 Tatar slaves (41,5%), in the next two decades 1425–1449 the figures decrease until 57 (just over 19%). The Russian slaves pass from 51 (20%) to 123 (41,6%). A similar trend occurred in Tana in the same years [19; 10; 6, buste 11, 64, 79, 94 and 147/a].

In Western Europe, the use of slave labor was mainly moving into housework; this explains the neat predominance of women in the negotiations. The documents analyzed mention – for the late 14<sup>th</sup> century – 175 cases (74,78%) in which the object of the transaction is a woman. In addition, it should not be forgotten that many girls were purchased in order to satisfy diverse needs, including sex.



**Graph 1.** Price trend of Tatar slaves in Tana (1359–1360)

Observing the graph, we may notice females (in red) were worth less in childhood because they could not accomplish most of the tasks for which they had been purchased. In contrast, merchants for arduous works could use males already at the age of 9 or 10. The price of females constantly grows in direct proportion to age, and this indicates a tight link between the value of the slave and the reason for which women were purchased. Instead, males lost value during adolescence, when they were not young enough to be integrated into a new social framework, to which the buyer belonged. On the other hand, they were too young to withstand hard work.

If we look at the quantity of slaves compared by age, some interesting insights emerge. For example, we notice that the average age is higher for females (14,87 years versus 12,8). This data, together with the predominant quantity of girls traded in youth (from the age of 14 to 18), suggests a reaction caused by a condition of

necessity: nomad families got rid of girls later than boys (on late 13<sup>th</sup> century, see M. Balard: [8, p. 292]). In a non-agricultural nomadic society, girls were more useful than boys for housework. More than the origin, age and gender counted [8, p. 294].

Most of the slaves were very young, and it suggests a rather recent enslavement. In fact, it appears that elders were often sold with their children, sometimes as entire families. On 22 August 1362, the Greek Teodoro sold to Corrado, Venetian, a 36 years old Tatar woman, and her 8 years old daughter [1, busta 19, II/4]. A few days later, on 31 August, another Tatar woman is sold together with her daughter [1, busta 19, II/16]. On 18 September, Bartolo Fantinechi sells to Paolo Nanni a 30 years old man and his 14 years old son [1, busta 19, II/100].

From the total of traded slaves, 115 (49,14%) are baptized; of course, all those who arrived in Venice the next year were baptized too. Slaves remained shortly in Tana because the settlement of the Azov Sea was not, as mentioned above, an arrival point for the slave trade. It was instead a transit market, pierced into a vast, Mediterranean commercial system [8, p. 292; 9, p. 229]. Bratianu, refers to the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, but we can extend these characteristics to the next century, taking into account that the slave trade in the East reached its peak precisely in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

From the documentation that covers the two years from 1359 to 1360, and the notarial acts of the immediate next years, we notice a sharp fall in price. In some cases, the price fell by a third over the two years. For the males of *genere tartarorum*, the most represented in the records, it had gone from an average of 651,5 aspers to 183,5 (a drop by over 70%).

Things are very similar for females, where the prices go from an average of 720,42 aspers to 229,2 (also in this case the decrease was 68%). There can be many reasons for this phenomenon. I would consider the strong political change that occurred in Tana as the main cause. In 1359, Berdibek, khan of the Golden Horde, died and the succession was complicated. The attitude of the Mongol authorities towards the commercial immigration abruptly changed. The dismemberment of political unity inside the Golden Horde was occurring well before the deaths of Berdibek and Janibek. However, the charisma and the energetic repressive action exercised by them, delayed the implosion of the Ulus Jochi. A further confirmation of the complicated political situation comes from the ship freights. The *incanti* of the galleys to *Romania* suffered a drastic fall in these years [22, p. 27–34; 24]. Finally, after 1361, the Turkish military action in Thrace intensified causing many problems to the commerce in the Region.

The Italian merchants ran from a relative enthusiasm – also determined by the return to Tana in 1358 – to a more solid realism. The inhabitants of Tana had to deal with a growing insecurity. It is likely that the slow economic and demographic recovery followed the disastrous outbreak of bubonic plague has diminished the commercial resources and the trade structures for exchanging slaves in the Orient.

In good times, the gains that could be achieved from the sale of slaves were huge. On 5 May 1364, Jacopo Contini and Nanni di Nanni sell to Pasqualino Cotano a 10 years old boy, *genere tartarorum*, already baptized with the name Giorgio. The notary recorded that the slave was purchased on 7 July 1360 in Tana when the boy was 6 years old; he remained with the merchants for almost 4 years

and was finally sold for 30 Venetian ducats [1, busta 19, carte sciolte, foglio 7]. We should consider that in September 1362, Ludovico Bedolotto sells to his brother a 10 years old Tatar slave, for 10 ducats [1, busta 117]. If we take as valid the change asper-ducato in use in 1360's Tana (1/42,5) then the boy was sold for an amount of circa 1275 aspers. The average price for a Tatar slave of that age was no more than 500 aspers, so the profit was very good (over 60%), even if we consider the huge expenses withstood by merchants to travel to the Azov Sea.

For the same amount, two slaves, 13 and 14 years old, were sold in Venice in the same year [1, busta 19, carte sciolte, fogli 2 and 11v]. On 18 September 1364, Andrea Trevisan purchased a 20 years old Tatar girl from *donna* Maria, wife of Tommaso Biondo, from Ancona. The price was fixed in 40 ducats [1, busta 19, carte sciolte, foglio 14]. In this case, it was possible to purchase Tatar girls, around the age of 20, for circa 400 aspers, though the profit was even bigger, almost 70%. On 2 December 1366, Pietro Stornello sold to Niccolò da Pesaro a 12 years old Tatar girl, baptized with the name Lucia, for a price of 22 ducats. On 16 June 1368, Niccolò Rubino sold to the same Niccolò da Pesaro an 11 years old Tatar boy for 26 ducats. The prices were rising in these years. In 1374, for a 13 years old Tatar girl, our Niccolò paid 30 ducats [6, busta 150].

In early 15<sup>th</sup> century, the slave trade changes. The records analyzed are not too many: 146 documents and only 41 (28,1%) concern slave trade.

The presence of Tatar slaves decreases in the documentation (19,5%). The majority are Russians and Circassians. This fact agrees with Gioffré's version on 15<sup>th</sup> century Genoa. In particular, between 1407 and 1408, out of 16 slaves, seven are Tatars, six Circassian, two *genere de Zichia* (from the Kerč Straits), 1 Russian and a Bulgarian girl. A few years later (1413–1416), the Tatars almost disappear from the sources; Russians and Circassians increase. The seller is often a Venetian merchant who lived shortly in Tana. In some cases, merchants from Transoxiana and Turkestan traveled to the Azov Sea to sell slaves they had bought in the steppe.

On 20 April 1408, a Saracen named Congo sold to Pietro Loredan a 20 years old Circassian girl [10, n. 24]. The same day, another Saracen named Amuxa sold to Giovanni di Mauro a 30 years old Tatar woman. On 17 May 1408, Zindi, *saracenus de Zolati*, sold to Marco Marceno a 14 old boy and the same day Maometto sold to Pietro Loredan a girl *de Zichia* [10, n. 25, 31 and 32]. On 9 August 1415 Omar Carac, *saracenus de Urganiciis* (Urgench), sold to Marco di Allega a Russian boy [19, p. 85].

In early 15<sup>th</sup> century, the capability of European merchants to find slaves within the borders of the Golden Horde decreased, especially because of the Timurid advance. The emergence of a new center of power around Moscow, and the vital economy of the Region, despite many periods of crisis, made possible the mobility of men; the degree of difficulties for traveling significantly increased, but already from the 1410's circulation of people started again over long distances. One of the immediate consequences of Timur's military campaigns was the decadence of the most frequented transit routes in favor of the southern passage [20, p. 435–439]. Tana suffered the new situation and the merchants from Saraj found more difficult to reach the mouth of the Don River. However, the merchants from Persia and Transoxiana (Urgench, Merv, Samarkand) filled the void. In fact, according to the

accounting book (Massaria) of Caffa, in 1410 the *introitu Sancti Anonini* was still due [28, Vol. II, p. 953]. Furthermore, on 10 August 1427, a ship with 400 slaves («ultra numeros quadringentorum inter sclavos et sclavas») sailed from Tana to Venice. The sea conditions were rough and the Venetian Senate authorizes the ship to go to Istria and «que dictos sclavos et sclavas conduci facient Venetias usque per totum mensem decembris proximus» [7, registro 56, foglio 120]. Evidently, the commerce of slaves in this Region was still vital in the early years of the 15<sup>th</sup> century [28, Vol. II, p. 955–963].

The Timurid invasions brought destruction into Central Asia and the Caucasus, and some of the most important centers for recruiting slaves were seriously affected by it. Nevertheless, the activity of the Italian merchants did not stop. Indeed, even after the Ottoman conquest and the partition of Crimea, the slave trade was for centuries a very profitable business for the Italian merchants. Despite the firm moral condemnations of slavery by the Church authorities, Crimea and the Azov Sea remained in pre-modern times one of the most lucrative basins of human merchandise in the world (see on this M. Kizilov: [16]).

In Tana in particular, even though the growing difficulties in recruiting, in the 1400's, the slave trade in Tana was still good deal.

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## НЕСКОЛЬКО ЗАМЕЧАНИЙ ПО РАБОТОРГОВЛЕ В ЗОЛОТОЙ ОРДЕ (XIV ВЕК) ПО СЛЕДАМ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ Ч. ВЕРЛИНДЕННА

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*Цель исследования:* в течение многих десятилетий работорговля была очень прибыльным делом для итальянских купцов, которые прибывали на Восток. Формирование Монгольской империи и экономический и демографический рост, наблюдавшийся в Европе, способствовали параллельному росту спроса на рабов и предложения этого типа коммерческого товара. Торговля возросла с одновременным увеличением числа поездок западных купцов на Восток.

Организация структурированной торговой системы на побережье Черного моря позволила Генуе и Венеции упрочить торговые отношения с доминирующими центрами власти: с Золотой Ордой монголов и мамлюками Египта.

*Материалы исследования:* эта статья представляет собой предварительное критическое отображение более крупного проекта, над которым я работаю и который имеет своей целью исследовать взаимосвязь между итальянской коммерческой иммиграцией и работорговлей в венецианской фактории Таны, располагавшейся в устье Дона и представлявшей собой самый восточный форпост всей латинской торговой системы на Востоке в XIII и XIV веках. Основываясь на солидной историографии и венецианских документальных источниках, я пытаюсь восстановить восприятие раба в уникальном контексте контакта между западным городским и восточным кочевническим факторами.

*Результаты и новизна исследования:* Хотя многие заключения данного исследования еще требуют своего подтверждения, это первичное изыскание показало, что рабы были не только первичным и наиболее выгодным торговым ресурсом итальянских купцов, но и самым прямым и эффективным средством для понимания этнического и в сущности чуждого для них контекста.

**Ключевые слова:** Черное море, рабство, Венеция, Генуя, Средиземноморье в Средние века

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